

Love Hurts
Good Friday 2017

Passion According to Matthew

The book of Genesis, The New Revised Standard Version, begins with the words, “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth.” The very last verse of the Bible in the book of revelation is a blessing: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all the saints. Amen.” The holy book that is the foundation of the faith upon which we stand begins with creation and culminates in blessing. Today we find ourselves standing once again in the middle of the unfolding story at the foot of the cross: between the goodness of creation in its infancy and the final blessing of post resurrection.

It is a challenge to see the creative genius of God at work in the Passion of Jesus. We want to see it. We look for it. We call this day “good” although the goodness is elusive. Some may expect the preacher to soften the agony and suffering inherent so that we might gloss over the gore by donning rose coloured glasses. Maybe suggest that Jesus did not feel pain because of his affiliation to God. But if he did not experience agony in all of its fullness from the loneliness of abandonment to the physical pain caused by flogging and impaling it is hard to imagine why his final cry addressed his feelings of Godforsakeness.

I read this week that a preacher intent on softening the pain of the story suggested that as a carpenter in his former life Jesus may even have admired the wood upon which he had been impaled. That is a superlative stretch because I don’t believe that the instrument of torture had been sanded and varnished, nor that Jesus would fixate upon its grain. It cheapens the story in its attempt to glorify the inglorious. This is a story about the pain of love; the cost that is borne by

the creator who loved the world. The love of the son for the Father and all people. Love can be a great blessing and inspiration but it is not always exempt from pain.

Love hurts when partner, parent, sibling or child die. Love is rooted in the family but not all families are all loving.

I have been at funerals where one part of the family distances themselves from another because of some infraction or misunderstanding of the once upon a time. Sometimes it is because of greed; they are afraid that someone will get more in a will. I have known people where the family rifts were so deep that a son was not informed of his mother's death for six months after it occurred. There are empty chairs at holidays and family occasions because this member of the clan refuses to be in the same room as another. Love hurts when fractured families dictate means that an occasion cannot be celebrated with all members of the family present.

Love hurts when here is the teenage angst reigns supreme and a troubled youth screams I hate you to a parent. There can be an element of pain even in a blessing when a promotion or possibility of employment means that a cherished friend or relative may need to relocate to another city, country or continent. Granted it is much easier in this age of technology in which we live to stay in touch with email and face book and texting. But it isn't the same as being able to meet for lunch or coffee. Loving another is a great blessing but it is no stranger to pain.

Love hurts when one that we hold dear is diagnosed with something life altering. It hurts when we see someone living beyond the time when they recognize their partners, children and grandchildren because of dementia. We do not wish them dead and we seek to find the blessing inherent in a disease that robs one of their relationships, memories and sense of self. We remember them when they were vibrant and dynamic and capable and we ache for the loss of

them; here somehow but no longer here; with us and yet somehow taken. Love hurts and Good Friday is a vivid and compelling reminder of that truth.

We find blessing, strength and encouragement in recalling the pain that Jesus endured and draw strength from it when hearts are broken; when souls are pierced by circumstance and body wracked with pain. Jesus experienced much pain for the sake of, and, in the name of love as the passion reading has reminded.

He experienced the pain of betrayal; knowing that one of his handpicked disciples and closest of friends would sell him out for a price. Undaunted he kept his friends close and his enemies closer; making his way to Jerusalem as a dutiful son of both Abraham and God to observe the Passover. He sat at table with his disciples knowing that in fear they would abandon him. Remained stalwart and restrained as each one, including Judas, responded in arrogance to the announcement of pending betrayal, surely not I. It takes a truly providential love to sit at table with a betrayer and not betray that knowledge. Just as it takes providential love to know in advance that when he faced his darkest hour he would not be able to rely upon his closest friends to remain with him.

Not only did he predict their desertion in the Garden he could not rely upon them to remain awake and pray with him. Sometimes prayer is the only thing that we can proffer when all other avenues have exhausted. Treatments are ineffective and have been stopped. Decisions are made to face the end with compassion; keeping one free from pain and as comfortable as possible. God may not intervene to change the expected course but there is a solidarity of shared suffering when the blessing of God is beseeched as a final matter of course. We know from the heart wrenching prayers of Jesus in the Garden that God does not always stay the hand of fate.

There was no miracle for the Son of God. No intervention. No staying of execution. There is only this image of Jesus praying in earnest in his darkest hour for God's blessing to remain when all else has been exhausted. Sometimes all that is left to do is to stay in the moment with all of its agony and demands and pray they will be done. Love hurts but it also blesses, sustains and empowers.

It empowered Jesus to carry the cross and it empowers us to carry the cross in our strength and in our vulnerability.

I had a brother who was diagnosed with acute myelocytic leukemia in 1982 when he was thirty years old. In those days the only available treatment was a bone marrow transplant and there had been no success to date at that time. The procedure was done in April 1983 and he suffered every side effect and died four months later. Shortly before his death the nurses insisted on changing the sheets on his bed and he was very uncomfortable. They tried to do it with him in bed, changing one side at a time but rolling over caused him great agony and he screamed for them to stop. My father was in the room and he offered to lift him out of his bed and place him in a chair. He uncovered his weak and emaciated son, wracked with pain and slid his strong arms underneath his shoulders and legs; drew him up from his bed and gently placed him in a corner chair. After the bed was changed I watched a second time as my father lifted his only born son out of the chair, carried him to his bed, gently lay him down, covered him with a sheet and kissed him on the forehead.

It had been many years since my father had held his son in his arms and put him to bed; longer still since he had kissed him good night. It was like witnessing a masculine version of Michelangelo's Pieta. It was bittersweet and I shall not forget the love of the father for the only born son.

Love hurts; but it blesses, empowers and sustains.

When my own daughter was dying it was difficult to stay in the moment. Breathing was laboured. Eyes were transfixed and unseeing. Moments before she died she seemed to see something come into the room that frightened her. She was assured that she was not alone. I remember thinking that she would simply expire; that my final memory of her would be of agonizing suffering and an absence of peace. And then her countenance changed. Eyes that had been unfocussed became clear. Her head that had not moved in hours turned and she looked me in the eye. She wore the expression of perfect love on her face; as though she were already an angel. She did not speak but her eyes seemed to communicate that she was not afraid; that she knew that she was loved; that she would not be forgotten and we would not be forgotten by her. And then in peace she breathed her last.

It was as though God whispered into my soul, “Woman behold your daughter: at peace, loved and secure in the arms of providence. Daughter, behold your mother: prepared to let go and still hang on to your person, memory and love.”

Love hurts but it also blesses, empowers and sustains.

This is why we call this day “good.” Despite its association with human weakness and the reminder of how power corrupts. The loneliness of betrayal, the cruelty of flogging, the abject humiliation of mockery and seeming Godforsakenness demonstrates with acuity the worst in humanity when fear dictates but it is not without its redemption.

Not once does Jesus condemn the betrayer nor express disappointment in the one who denied or the rest who fled. Despite sitting at table to celebrate the Passover with those who were dearest to him but who would flee for their lives when confronted by adversaries, Jesus took bread and

wine and gave them the gift of the Eucharist. The broken bread of his body and the spilled cup of his blood would serve to unify, fortify and sustain his disciples as they carried on his name.

At a once and future time when agents came demanding their arrest, inquisition and very lives, they would find the strength, courage and faith to stand firm and neither deny nor flee.

When their lives were demanded they would not resist. His gift to his disciples continues to be the means by which we fortify ourselves when circumstance demands that we stay in the moment regardless of how difficult. Word and sacrament continue to remind us of the unseen things even if we feel abandoned and forsaken. Enables us to let go and still cling to the love, memory and purpose. Despite the plethora of unseemly characters who played a part in his betrayal, arrest, beating, berating, crucifixion and death there were those who did not collude with the accusation, cruelty or demise of the only born Son.

Joseph of Arimathea could do little to stall the agenda of the enemies of Jesus. His voice was probably drowned out by those who demanded the death of Jesus. But he stayed by the cross; perhaps praying as his only recourse that death might come swiftly and put an end to his suffering. And then he asked for the body. Other corpses were considered defiled and unworthy and were often left to rot on the crosses that bore them. Jesus deserved better and Joseph knew this. He sought permission to not leave Jesus hanging on an instrument of torture and requested his body be removed for burial.

He wrapped it in clean cloths, covering the scars of his beating and impaling and placed him in a tomb. And Mary and Mary Magdalene watched so that they might return post Sabbath to properly anoint and embalm.

When our daughter died Michael and I were attended in vigil by a former student of mine who refused to leave us as the hours wore on. She was the one we had asked to preside over the service because I wanted a woman and a mother to minister to me on that day. Her husband was apprenticing as a Funeral Director at a local funeral home at the time and we opted to use that business and requested that he be involved. Sometime after the funeral, while sitting at a beach and watching our children play in the sand and surf, our minister, also named Mary, confided that on the morning that Lesley was going to be dressed prior to the visitation her husband asked if she would like to assist.

It gave me great comfort knowing that the loving hands of a mother, friend and soon to be colleague in ministry prepared my daughter for burial.

Love hurts but it also blesses, empowers and sustains.

In the beginning God. In the end the blessing of Christ. That is why we call this day, Good.

Amen.